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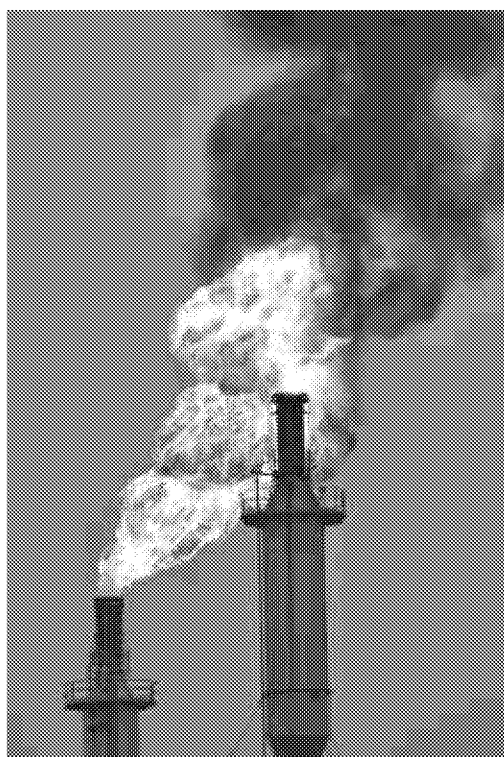
Go Back

Print Page

Air quality agency wants tighter regulations at Torrance oil refinery, and all others

By Nick Green, Daily Breeze

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Calling the huge flares and thick black smoke that belched from the Torrance refinery this week a public nuisance, Southern California's air quality watchdog plans to require the plant to improve its power supply, electrical infrastructure and maintenance.

In addition, the South Coast Air Quality District is seeking to implement additional regulations on all Southern California oil refineries next year that include:

- Increased penalties and fees for flaring events.
- Enhanced backup power supply systems so flaring can be avoided in the event of an outage.
- Operation of air pollution monitoring systems capable of providing real-time information to the community regarding air pollution.

Flaring unacceptable

"The Torrance Refining Co. has been responsible for an unacceptably high number of flaring events resulting from shutdowns at its Torrance facility," Wayne Nastri, acting AQMD executive officer said in a statement.

"We share the community's concern about these flaring events," he added. "We are initiating new enforcement and rule-making actions aimed at minimizing these events."

The AQMD noted that in addition to this week's multiday flaring event that was caused by a power outage, the refinery flared extensively after a Sept. 19 outage and on July 11 due to a software malfunction.

PBF Energy took over operation of the refinery July 1 from ExxonMobil.

It's rare for the AQMD to issue a notice of violation for excessive flaring and declare it a public nuisance.

The AQMD has on four occasions since 2000 declared that Southern California refineries have created a public nuisance for odors associated with flaring, but not for the flaring itself.

This time around the agency noted that the tall flames and black smoke that billowed for hours was so excessive that Torrance officials issued a citywide shelter-in-place order.

“Since the new owner has assumed operation of the refinery, they have had several extended incidents of flaring due to power outages,” said AQMD spokesman Sam Atwood. “And this is not something we’re seeing with other refineries.”

Community activists applauded the AQMD action.

“We are pleased to see action being taken following ongoing flaring events at Torrance Refinery,” said Catherine Leys, cofounder of Families Lobbying Against Refinery Exposures, or FLARE.

“The South Bay community relies on SCAQMD to regulate in a way that maintains a balance between industry operations and community health and safety; that balance has been compromised and the community concern has been loud,” she added via email.

“We look forward to the implementation of these plans and urge residents of Torrance and the surrounding South Bay community to take part in the process and voice their concerns to the SCAQMD.”

Abatement order sought

Residents likely will do just that after the AQMD files a petition for an abatement order next week with the independent, quasi-judicial SCAQMD Hearing Board to force PBF Energy to make the infrastructure improvements at the refinery.

The public is expected to have a chance to testify on the proposed administrative order at what will likely be a multiday hearing that, at least in part, could be held in Torrance.

PBF Energy disagreed with the AQMD’s characterization of the refinery’s recent flaring events.

“The most recent flaring event was necessary for emergency purposes and to safely restart the refinery,” spokeswoman Betsy Brien said via email. “We firmly believe that the flaring that occurred was conducted in compliance with our permit conditions, SCAQMD rules, and other applicable regulations.

“This flaring event was a result of a 26-minute power interruption on SCE’s system outside the refinery, which impacted not only the refinery but also 100,000 of SCE’s South Bay customers,” she added. “In addition, the refinery has experienced four other power interruptions in the last month originating outside of the refinery.

Backup power supplies

But Atwood said that unlike in Torrance, some other refineries in the area have cogeneration facilities that can serve as a backup power supply.

“That sounds simple, but it is not that easy,” said Jeffrey Dill, PBF president of its Western region. “A backup system would not necessarily make us completely independent of SCE’s grid. There are faster, equally effective ways to improve the reliability, and that is what we are focused on accomplishing for everyone’s benefit.”

Nevertheless, if the AQMD is successful at passing more stringent regulations next year, a backup system may become a requirement anyway.

“All refineries need to do their utmost to minimize flaring to protect our air quality and our communities,” Nastri said. “These enforcement measures will ensure that the Torrance facility and all Southland refineries achieve that goal.”

Meanwhile, the city’s Police Department has apologized on its Facebook page for delays in the automated alert system meant to alert the public to refinery emergencies.

“We are evaluating the infrastructure as well as the performance of the system and our personnel, to improve delivery time,” the department statement read in part.

[Go Back](#)[Print Page](#)

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